

Changes to Town Charter discussion continues tonight at Town Hall

Vote scheduled for tonight to be ready for FTM

By Erin Tiernan

At its regular meeting Monday night, the Town Council continued discussions surrounding amendments to Jamestown's Town Charter and decided to reconvene at Town Hall tonight, Thursday, May 21, at 6:30 p.m. for further debate and to vote on definitive revisions.

Charter discussions have monopolized the past few council meetings, but councilors decided they need more time to deliberate recommendations from citizens and the Charter Review Committee regarding election years and term lengths for town council and school committee members, the responsibilities of the town administrator, the format of the annual financial town meeting and specific language used within the document.

According to Town Solicitor Peter Ruggiero, time is running short. Councilors need to act quickly to ensure approval of the charter by the Secretary of State and the General Assembly before state lawmakers adjourn sometime around July. He said time is needed to draw up questions to ask voters at the financial town meeting on June 1.

The largest concerns involved term lengths and election years.

Currently, elections for town officials are held on odd years, which costs the town about \$10,000 more per election than if they were held alongside the general elections on even years.

Financial benefits to changing election years were refuted by concerns of uninformed voters. Sav Rebecchi, charter commission member, worried the larger voter turnout at general elections would force people uninvolved in town issues to make ad hoc decisions that could negatively impact the town. "This \$10,000 expense comes out to about \$1 a year per registered voter to keep the autonomy of our own elections and having only people (vote) that are really interested in the town," he said. "I would favor that."

Council President Julio Di-Giando also favored off-year elections, but Councilman Bill Kelly disagreed, "We have, I think, a very intelligent electorate here in Jamestown and when we get 70 percent of the people turning out to vote, I think it would do us good to get them to turn out for the town council. I think to say that they're not committed or not concerned isn't fair to those people."

Councilman Michael White suggested exploring the possibility of staggering elections to ensure continuity of experienced council members.

Resident Tot Wright advocated off-year elections. "Personally I'm not comfortable with the elections being on an even year as long as the state still has the single party lever because I think that could have an enormous impact on the vote in question."

The Town Council will hold a Town Charter review meeting at Town Hall tonight, Thursday, May 21, at 6:30 p.m. for further debate and to vote on definitive revisions.

Bills are on the floor in both the Rhode Island House and Senate considering the implications of eliminating the straight party vote option. The council intends to discuss this issue further at their meeting on June 15.

Another past hot button issue, term lengths, was less of an issue Monday night. After a letter to the editor in the Jamestown Press written by Harry Wright, councilors

appeared to agree that two-year terms were sufficient.

Kelly, previously in favor of extending from 2 to 4 year terms, agreed with Harry Wright's reasoning that shorter terms allow for ample continuity of experienced officials while offering more opportunity for change. "I think it gives the electorates some flexibility as to change, but it also gives the individuals running the ability to say okay, two years, I've served my time and I'm out of here."

The format of the town's annual financial meeting was a concern for Susan Little, who serves on both the charter committee and the Harbor Commission. She said the open forum structure and vo-

cal vote was intimidating for some people and discouraged public attendance and sharing of opinions.

White was reluctant to discuss changing the format. The council said it would appreciate more public opinion during financial meetings but said that changing the charter would confine the meeting to strict standards that would be difficult to uphold. Councilwoman Barbara Szepatowski agreed that fear definitely played a factor in the historically low turnouts.

"The financial town meeting is such a unique thing that I'm not sure we can solve it," said White. "The idea is that you have the right to speak up and you have the right

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MURPHY'S LAW

"That would be the honorable thing to do," said Gary Maddocks, when he heard the news over a plate of ziti at Santoro's Pizza and Hot Weiners."

— Providence Journal article on the resignation of Senator Celena

With that single sentence, the essence of Rhode Island's political and culinary culture is succinctly captured. As to the food items mentioned, one can only say, in awe, "what a combination".

With the forced resignations of two disgraced Chief Justices, the jailing of a Governor and a Mayor, and the arrogant malfeasance of rogues in the General Assembly, Rhode Island's civic history in the last thirty years has been one for which shame is the only reasonable reaction.

The use of the terms "Chief Justice", "Your Honor", "His Excellency", et cetera, when applied to certain office holders, is so ridiculous as to approach absurdity. The saving rationale: we do respect the office.

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